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The Toxic Entrepreneur

It's time to take a hard look at yourself to see if your behaviors and attitudes are creating a toxic environment at your company.

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Last month, I wrote about toxic employees--those individuals who, like nasty chemicals, can be harmful and destroy almost anyone or anything they come in contact with. You may have even known this type of employee or, worse yet, may have employed one. If you're lucky, you don't have one working for you now!

But did you ever consider the fact that you could be a toxic person yourself? My guess is, it's never even crossed your mind. After all, you're the boss and you've worked hard to build a successful organization. So how could you be toxic?

It happens all the time.

But you're the boss: You call the shots, you're in charge, you sign the paychecks and employees report to you. So how could your behavior be problematic? Well, it can be problematic even if you are in charge or, more important, it can be problematic simply because *you* are in charge.

Whatever your management style, whatever your company size or whatever your industry, your employees want and need to admire and respect you. They want to look up to you, and often, they want to model themselves after you. However, when your behavior or attitude turns toxic, you confuse your employees, who previously looked up to you. They experience a conflict between wanting to see you as credible, trustworthy and admirable, but are actually experiencing you as negative, and counterproductive to productivity and worker satisfaction. Clearly, you have a problem on your hands.

Remember, just because you're in charge doesn't mean you're exempt from causing problems. And your employees aren't immune from imitating your problematic behaviors and attitudes. Employees try--and often succeed--in repeating the behaviors they see, especially the behavior of their boss. If your actions or thoughts are negative and counterproductive to success, then you've created a standard, a norm and a model for others to replicate. And neither you nor your employees are immune from the virus-like spread of these behaviors and attitudes to others. Soon, the work environment becomes toxic, with productivity, profits and morale all decreasing. And you may not even know why.

The Signs of Toxicity

Often, the signs of toxicity are obvious to others but not to you. They're most likely hidden by your refusal or inability to see them. Some of the most virulent forms of this poisonous negativity include:

- Increases in turnover and/or absenteeism
- Increases in industrial accidents
- Increases in employee complaints
- Increases in your criticism of others
- Increases in your employee demands that go beyond acceptability

- Increases in your cryptic, negative or sarcastic comments
- Increases in arguments
- Decreases in productivity and profitability
- Decreases in the numbers of employees who seek out your opinion or direction
- Decreases in morale
- Decreases in your satisfaction with others
- Decreases in successes and accomplishments from both you and your employees

So what's the cure? First, take a deep breath and calm down. No one's perfect, not even the boss. Being aware of the problem is the first step toward resolving it. Second, identify the symptoms. Reread the previous list; try to add more items to it. Third, get objective feedback by confiding in a trusted friend or fellow business owner who can provide you with honest information on your behavior and attitude, without fear of reprisals for that honesty.

Fourth, identify which part of what you do is really the issue. Are you verbally critical or abusive? Are you overly impatient? Are you excessively fault finding? Do you complain too much about employees or productivity? Are you more negative with certain people, processes or events? Do you believe that people shouldn't need support or encouragement from you? Do you purposely avoid interacting with certain employees? Do you provide more negative feedback than positive to others?

Take Action

Once you've identified someone whom you can trust, whether that's a close friend, an executive coach or consultant, or another business owner you know well, here are a few steps you can take to resolve the problem:

- Discuss and share with this person exactly which behaviors or attitudes seem to at issue. Make sure you both agree on these points.
- State why you want to change or modify these behaviors.
- Identify ways or methods you can begin to transform the challenging areas. Spend a lot of time on this one because this is critical in achieving success.
- Set up a realistic timeframe to achieve your goals.
- Ascertain ways to evaluate your progress and know when you've succeeded implementing new behaviors and attitudes.
- Finally, be sure to reward yourself for your progress. Rewarding yourself will increase the probability that you'll repeat these positive behaviors.

In addition to working through the issues with your mentor, it's also important to identify a person with whom you've had difficulty because of your toxic behavior. Once you're on the path to recovery and have interacted with them again, ask them for their perception of this latest contact. Find out how they perceived the "new you." You can truly begin the process of de-toxifying when you demonstrate to that person that you honestly want feedback and that giving it in no way will result in any retribution, even if the feedback is negative. Then praise or thank them for giving you the feedback.

You'll gain brownie points with this person simply by requesting the information and then responding in a positive manner. You'll be showing yourself to be a more open person, intent on gaining information to improve your behavior. And in that way, you'll be modeling for that employee a positive behavior that hopefully they'll use with others. In one fell swoop, you'll have accomplished two goals at once. And you'll be well on your way to eliminating the toxicity in your life.

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